cerulean sky

By: rumiberri
[AU] When the whole world stops, but maybe, so have you.
Rated: Fiction T - English - Madoka K., Homura A.

As time passes and her older memories fade, she only knows two places very clearly.

The first, is the room that they had shoved her into, how many years ago; the one she still lives in to this day.

One side houses the entrance that will slide open for food or visits, while the other side leads to a bathroom.

The second, is the larger room they drag her into for testing.

Where the creature with white skin and glowing red eyes will try and determine how her powers work.

Once the sedation wears off however, that creature will be the first to go: a pile of dust as time suddenly fast forwards. More replacements will arrive, leaving more dust to scatter. It'll continue on and on, until they determine they have enough information, and then the walls will open, pumping out the usual sleeping gas. She always manages to get every last one, before the poison finally seeps deep into her lungs.

A few hours later, she'll wake, groggy, and in her usual cell, where she'll remain lying on the floor, because this is her life now, and there's nothing else for her.

Except to wait for the door to open once more.

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She remembers four people in her mind, though she's not sure if the white creature is a person, or if it's something else.

The second, is the assistant to the white creature.

Like clockwork, his voice is always there, heard through the lone speaker attached to the corner of her room. Every day he wakes her in the morning; every day she ignores him. She has never been able to match a face with the voice though, and sometimes, when she's lying there, she tries to picture one in her mind.

All she sees is an indistinguishable black blur, because it's been so long since she has met another person.

The last two, are—were her parents.

She doesn't think of them much any more, but sometimes, when her mind wanders and she does remember, she wonders.

She wonders if they think about her; if the thought of her ever goes through their minds.

She knows though, that they probably don't. They're the reason she's here, after all.

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She's sleeping off lunch like usual when the door opens—not like usual.

She immediately sits up, wide awake, hands curled and on guard.

She continues to stare when she hears voices, and suddenly someone is roughly shoved into her cell. The door slides shut before the figure can stand, and she turns her attention to the stranger.

A small body, but, she glances down to herself, she's still quite small herself. The same loose gown worn—tells her they're also a prisoner.

Bright, pink hair.

The figure lifts their head, and she immediately draws back, pressing her body against the wall.

Pink eyes that she mistakes, and associates with glowing red.

She pulls her legs up, and immediately buries her face into her knees.

Even as she hears sounds as the figure shifts, she remains with her head down.

"Are you okay...?"

She flinches at the voice, and starts moving her body back, sliding it against the wall until she's finally resting in the safety of the corner.

"I'm sorry, I didn't—I'm..."

She shakes her head, fighting back her whimper. She can feel her collar tightening, and quickly clamps down on her powers.

Silence, though she's still listening to the vague clicking of the clock; she knows that minutes have passed, until she hears footsteps approach.

"I'm... Kaname Madoka... I won't hurt you, I promise..."

A soft protest released from her throat as she presses her face against the cool surface of the wall.

"...Can—I ask your name...?"

She doesn't remember.

"...Can—I touch you?"

She unsuccessfully tries to scoot further away; she can't because she's trapped in this corner.

"I—I mean, uhm, it's... that's... how my powers work... I can see uhm... memories... I promise I won't look at anything—I just—want to know your name..."

It's—maybe the most she has heard from a single person, in a long, long time, and slowly, she sits up as her curiosity overcomes her fear. She still has her knees drawn, and peeks out from behind her messy bangs to look at the stranger.

Pink eyes that don't glow; lighter than red.

She relaxes, and finally, lifts her head.

Cautiously, she inches her hand closer to the other girl.

She's given a smile—and it's enough of a shock that she doesn't even register the hand on hers.

"..." Madoka stares at her, gentle as she pulls her hand back. "...It's... nice to meet you, Homura-chan."

She tilts her head; a familiar name.

"It's..." Madoka moves tentatively, knowing eyes are watching as she scoots closer. "It's... really nice to meet you, Homura-chan..."

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Madoka doesn't stay long; thirty minutes, and the door slides open once more.

"I see you were able to tame her," the white creature says as it steps through.

She hisses, and her collar immediately clamps down painfully around her windpipe. She falls to the ground, hands clawing at the device as she struggles to breathe.

"Stop it! Homura-chan!" Madoka tries to help pull it off, but it's too late as her vision is already fading to black.

She coughs, eyes wincing as her grip slackens.

"Homura-chan!"

Her vision blurs, and the last thing she sees is a worried face, before everything disappears.

One hour and five minutes later, she wakes to an empty cell, and a dull pain in her neck.

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It's not the last time she sees her, but her visits are random.

A week here, less than three days there.

Two weeks.

A month.

The next time she sees her, it's only three days after her last visit, and she sits up eagerly when she hears the door slide open.

She freezes when she sees Madoka's face is swollen, one eye black and closed shut.

Madoka gives her a smile, along with a small bit of strained laughter. "...It's okay, Homura-chan... it—was my fault..."

Madoka sits next to her like always, and Homura slowly reaches over. Her fingers gently brush against bruised tissue, and when she sees Madoka flinch, she immediately pulls her hand away.

She opens her mouth, wanting to apologize, but unsure of how to.

Madoka smiles again, reaching for her hand. "It's okay. I'm okay..."

She's as gentle as possible as she strokes Madoka's face, but she can still see how much it's hurting her.

She doesn't need to think twice.

Madoka blinks when the pain suddenly ebbs away. Soon, her face is healed, and her eye opens in surprise.

"Homura-chan...?"

Her hand returns into her lap as her lavender eyes stare back. Madoka recognizes that look—like a child seeking praise. She smiles, and draws Homura in close.

"Thank you, Homura-chan."

She hums in content, liking how warm Madoka is. Her mood drops when she hears static from the speaker.

"What was that?"

The creature's assistant.

She narrows her eyes at the hidden camera, and it pops and sizzles right before the device turns into rust.

"Homura-chan...?"

She knows the door will soon open. She pulls at her collar, and Madoka stares in surprise as metal pieces crumble to the floor.

A hand is pressed against Madoka briefly, in reassurance, before Homura turns to the door as it opens.

"Her powers have increased again!" the voice shouts from the speakers.

More white creatures—an endless wave of them as they try to subdue her.

A small fight, until a needle finally pierces flesh. When she wakes half a day later, she finds something soft under her head, and something warm on top of her.

Like always, there's the taste of blood in her mouth. It takes a second, before she restores her body to normal, pointedly ignoring the warning beeps from her new collar.

The figure draped over her however, stirs awake at the unfamiliar sound.

"Homura...-chan?" Madoka sits up sleepily, rubbing at her eyes. She blinks when lavender stares back. "Homura-chan!" She throws her arms around the other girl. "You're okay."

She wraps her arms around Madoka; still warm. She hums again, and Madoka holds her close.

"...They want to keep me here, to help with your observations," Madoka murmurs softly. "...I-Is that okay, Homura-chan?"

She hugs her tighter.

"I'm glad, too," Madoka says with a small laugh.

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Her tests are further and farther in between.

With Madoka there, keeping her company, she's more compliant, more obedient.

Madoka is patient and kind and understanding. She teaches her how to speak; fills in those gaps in her memories. It's slow, but she helps her mend her mind. And on those days when she doesn't want to learn, Madoka fills in the silence with stories; both of her own, and from other people she has met.

She likes the sound of Madoka's voice, and even though sometimes she doesn't exactly understand what she's saying, she still nods as if she does.

Madoka knows though, and merely taps her on the nose, or pinches her on the cheek affectionately; she likes that too.

She finds out that they want to analyze her memories, to see if they can figure out how her brain works; to see how her powers work.

That's why Madoka is there—but she doesn't mind her, at all.

Her powers are confusing though, and she knows how much Madoka suffers because of it.

Sometimes, Madoka comes back holding her side, or sporting a new bruise on her face. She immediately heals her, knowing that they're deliberately provoking her to utilize her powers more.

She hates them, but she likes Madoka, so she lets them see as many times as they want.

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"...They seem to be getting more desperate," Madoka whispers, feeling fingertips along her skin as Homura tilts her face close, eyes staring at her split lip.

She's familiar enough with Madoka that it's easier now; a second later, only a small trace of blood remains.

She pulls back. "...Why?"

"Thank you, Homura-chan." Madoka leans against the wall, smiling when the other girl automatically joins her, leaving minimal space between their shoulders. "I'm not sure, but it seemed like they might try something else..."

Homura hums, closing her eyes as she lowers her head to rest on Madoka's shoulder.

Madoka takes her hand. "Homura-chan...? ...be careful, okay?" she whispers into her ear.

"Okay," she murmurs sleepily.

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It happens three days after Madoka's warning.

The door slides open, and she immediately sits up, keeping an arm in front of Madoka to protect her.

The white creature is back, and she bares her teeth in retaliation.

He clicks his tongue in disapproval, and shakes his head. "Humans really are like animals. Regaining your ability of speech should have brought you closer to being more civilized, and yet you always seem to act feral whenever you see me."

"Homura-chan..." Madoka places a shaking hand on her arm. "C-Calm down, Homura-chan..."

Homura glances at her, noticing the strange quiver in Madoka's voice.

The white creature steps closer, and Madoka immediately draws back. "W-What are you doing with that...?"

Homura blinks, and finally notices it's holding something in its hands.

Grey and sleek; metallic.

It smiles—a perverse twist of its mouth even as its eyes remains passive.

"Her powers are progressing too slowly; we need to increase the rate of growth somehow. Child," red eyes pierce to her direction, and she frowns in response, "do you know what this is?"

She doesn't.

She jumps when there's a sudden loud ringing in her ear.

"This, is a gun." The creature gestures to the wall—to the large hole in the reinforced plaster. "You have one chance to save her. I hope you don't disappoint."

He swings the weapon over, bringing a small red dot to rest in the middle of Madoka's forehead; a gasp as pink eyes widen.

"By the way, your power suppressor will be enabled as well."

She blinks, but suddenly finds it so very hard to breathe as the collar around her neck tightens.

She coughs as the pressure increases.

"Homura-chan!"

"You have better things to worry about.

His finger moves for the trigger, and Madoka squeezes her eyes shut.

When she feels no pain, she slowly cracks one eye open, only to be greeted with a very angry looking Homura.

"Homura-chan?"

Madoka turns, and understands why she's still alive.

Homura winces as her fingers wrap around her collar. She concentrates though the pain, and the collar slowly deteriorates in her hand.

She coughs once she's free, and Madoka reaches over to rub the red welt now surrounding her neck.

They hear the crackle of the speaker, but there are no words following after.

A few minutes pass, until the door opens halfway. A hand is held out, but Homura stops at the familiar squeak of wheels as one of the cleaner drones roll in. It vacuums the powdery mess and metal scraps, before it disappears behind the closing door.

Silence, and finally, Madoka draws in a shaky breath. Her arms wrap around Homura, and she leads her over to sit in their usual corner.

"Thank you, Homura-chan," Madoka murmurs. She kisses the top of her head, and Homura presses her face closer.

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Like always, they sleep, curled around each other. She has her head resting on Madoka's chest, listening to her heart beat as the other girl sleeps.

And beyond that, she can hear the slow ticking that follows Madoka around. She reaches out with her power, deliberate as she attempts to sync their clocks together.

Hers however, is much, much slower; it'll take a while longer until she'll be able to match them together.

She knows this is ultimately what they want, but this power is one she hardly understands herself; it's innate, and no matter how much they test, no matter how far in her mind Madoka will search, they still can't figure out how.

She doesn't care.

She scoots her body closer, eager and greedy for warmth. She hears Madoka mumble in her sleep, before those arms tighten around her.

\\

They're left alone for a week, until the door opens when they're both sleeping.

Arms roughly pull them up and out, and they're stumbling through the door, trying to wake and regain their bearings as they're dragged across hallways.

Hasty footsteps, not stopping even as Homura slips, her one hand slamming into the floor before she's forced back to her feet.

Madoka can't stop to help her as she's pushed forward, but before the protests and complaints can escape, they suddenly reach the end as they're shoved inside another room.

Without explanation or any words, the door shuts close, and they hear the hiss as the locks slide into place.

Madoka slowly sits up from where they had thrown her. "Homura-chan, are you okay...?"

Homura rubs at her wrist, waiting for the pain to disappear as she resets her bones. Once healed, she moves to join Madoka's side. "Okay..." she answers. "Madoka...?"

"I'm okay..."

Homura checks her over. When she's satisfied that Madoka is unhurt, they both stand to take a closer look at their new surroundings.

It's a larger room than their previous one, with a random line of lockers on one side, and shelves filled with containers on the other. Madoka runs her hands over them, letting the memories of how they got here flow through her mind.

She frowns. "...What is this place?"

Homura doesn't answer as she examines the walls; they're reinforced with even more power suppressors than her previous cell.

Madoka sighs. "Guess this is where we'll be staying..."

Homura nods, before she approaches the shelves. She points to one of the containers, and turns to Madoka.

"Mm..." Madoka joins her side. "I guess this is what we'll be eating from now on..."

Homura tilts her head, and Madoka pulls down the container.

"Food pills," she murmurs after she twists open the lid.

Homura peers inside. "Food...?"

Madoka nods. "Let's get washed up first, Homura-chan. And then we'll have 'breakfast.'"

"Okay."

/

"Homura-chan?"

She turns over so that she can see Madoka's face.

"...Do you know how much time has passed?"

She shakes her head; she can't hear anything but her own clock and Madoka's.

Madoka sighs. "There's... no way to keep track of time here. I can't even tell if it's day or night... Hasn't it been quiet lately...?"

Homura turns back onto her stomach as she continues to rest, lying across Madoka's lap.

"Yes," she agrees. "That's okay. I like it being quiet..."

Madoka gently pats her back. "Me too, Homura-chan. But... it's kind of strange, too..."

Homura hums.

They both fall back into silence, until Homura turns around, her hand reaching for Madoka's face.

"Madoka...?"

"Hm?"

Homura shyly stares at her, her eyes glancing down, and then back up. "C-Can you tell me a story...?"

Madoka smiles. "Okay. Is there any specific one you want to hear?"

Homura shakes her head.

"Hmmm." Madoka takes Homura's hand into her own as she starts shifting through memories. "Okay. How about... a story from when I was younger?"

Homura nods eagerly. "Okay."

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"Homura-chan?"

Homura makes a noise in her throat.

"...Do you think they forgot about us?"

Homura rolls over to her side, her eyes blinking slowly as she tries to wake up.

"...I can't be sure, but it's been a while, right?" Madoka asks her, reaching over to fix Homura's bangs into place.

Homura nods. They're down to their last container of food, and only their lowered metabolism keeps the hunger away.

Madoka kisses her on the forehead, before she slowly stands to her feet.

Homura remains lying on the floor, watching as Madoka pads across the room. She stops by the entrance, her hand once again touching the smooth surface of the door.

"...I still can't sense anything beyond this," she mutters to herself.

Homura moves her arms, using them as a pillow as she lowers her head. She closes her eyes, and hears Madoka's returning footsteps.

Half her body is lifted as her head is placed into Madoka's lap.

"...What do you think, Homura-chan?"

"...Bored."

"Mm..." Madoka strokes her head. "Yeah..."

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She raises her head, blinking because she hears an unfamiliar click.

It's soft, and if she doesn't focus, she loses it to the silence of her own clock.

It's there though, and she slowly sits up, untangling her legs from Madoka's as she turns to the door.

"Ho...mura-chan...?" Madoka pushes her body from the floor, looking at Homura in confusion. "What's wrong?"

"Clock..." Homura murmurs. She unsteadily climbs to her feet, making a beeline for the door. "Clicking..."

Soft footsteps follow her as Madoka hovers close.

"What is it?" Madoka asks softly.

Homura lowers her eyes as her hands wrap around the familiar collar. She concentrates—and like always, her magic doesn't work because this type of metal cannot rust. It doesn't beep though, and it doesn't tighten.

She immediately places her hand on the door. It's faint—and she needs to strain to figure out which pieces to ruin.

Madoka's eyes widen when she hears a creak, but Homura is grabbing her, and they're stumbling out of the way as the door wavers, before falling down with a loud crash.

They both remain huddled on the floor. Homura, as she's granted the usual passage of time; Madoka, as the opened door unleashes a wave of memories.

Homura is the first to recover. She touches Madoka's shoulder.

"Madoka...?"

"Just a moment," she mumbles, rubbing her temple as she tries to organize her new thoughts.

Homura nods, and sits in front of her, keeping an eye out for any dangers that may come rushing in.

Madoka knows, however, that the facility is empty. She takes a deep breath, before she reaches over, pulling Homura close to bury her face into her thin shoulder.

"Madoka...?"

"I'm okay," she murmurs. "Homura-chan? I think... something happened."

Homura nods. "Lots of... stopped clocks."

Madoka tries to swallow her fear. "Uh huh..."

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Before they leave the safety of their room, Madoka grabs one of the large backpacks from the lockers. She stuffs the last of their food inside, as well as the rest of the water tablets. Not knowing if they'd need it, she also grabs two extra sets of clothes: coveralls that they will need to roll and fold to accommodate their small bodies.

One last look around, before she shoulders the packed bag. "Homura-chan?"

She offers her hand to the other girl, who takes a few wobbly steps closer, unused to the large shoes and socks on her usually bare feet. Their clothes all but engulf them, and Madoka makes a mental note to find something better.

Madoka grabs Homura, pulling her close to steady her.

"Ready?"

She nods. "Yes."

"Let's go."

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Madoka leads them through a windy maze, using the memories to track the path towards the exit. Each time they run into a closed door, Homura steps forward, and a second later, the door crumbles and falls.

The further they continue, the darker the hallways become and eventually, Madoka has to rely solely on her extracted memories. She keeps one hand against the walls, the other holding Homura's as they continue onwards.

Finally, they reach another door that's different from the rest. There's light peeking through the cracks, and she can already feel the memories trickling past the weak barrier. Her hand holds Homura's arm to stop her from moving, and it takes her a moment to reinforce her mind.

"Okay," she breathes out as she moves Homura's hand to where the door is.

Homura glances at her once more for approval. She gives her another nod.

The familiar sound of metal crumpling, but when the pieces fall, this time there's a cloud of dust that follows after.

Madoka immediately covers her mouth with the sleeve of her jacket, and turns to Homura, helping her do the same.

It takes a few minutes until the air settles, and Madoka tentatively lowers her arm, testing the condition of the air.

Breathable.

She gestures to Homura, whose eyes are squinted due to the light. "I think it's okay now," she murmurs. "Dirt..." she blinks, "...from flooding."

Homura lowers her arm to her side. "Louder."

"What is, Homura-chan?"

Homura points to the doorway. "All the clocks are louder..."

Madoka nods, grabbing Homura's hand once more. "L-Let's go, Homura-chan."

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She runs her hand over the walls, taking the information she needs, using it to find out what had happened.

After a moment, she slowly withdraws her arm as her stomach churns; she knows now what those dark stains splattered along the walls and floor are of.

She turns, searching for Homura in the room. She finds her by the door, head tilted towards the exit, brow furrowed as she listens to something only she can hear.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura blinks, before she turns to her. "Madoka?"

"...Let's go outside."

"Okay."

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It's brighter outside, and Homura immediately buries her face into Madoka's shoulder, not used to the sunlight.

Madoka murmurs into her ear, stroking her head. "It's okay, Homura-chan. You'll get used to it," she reassures her even as she blinks rapidly, her own eyes trying to readjust.

Finally, she can keep them open long enough to take a good look around. The entrance to the building is to their left, covered with dirt and caked with rust. Traces of damage extend from the roof to the walls, and pieces of debris lies at their feet.

Heaps of rusted metal, and spare vegetation sprouting through cracks and holes in the cemented ground they're standing on.

Just how much time has passed—that what used to be a booming airport facility, has turned into this dry wasteland?

She pauses, pushing back more painful memories of what had happened to a few of the workers, before she leads Homura further outside.

The first thing is to find a means of transportation.

She follows the memories around the building, and finds a small hangar with its doors hanging open, barely held up by two rusted bolts in the corner.

She's careful as she slips inside, making sure that Homura doesn't accidentally bump into anything.

Luckily the roof is caved in, and there's enough light from the open ceiling for her search for the scooters she had seen a worker driving.

Unluckily, most of the hangar is empty, and the vehicles inside are in no condition to be driven.

She kicks angrily at the pile, and they both wince as metal creaks dangerously from her actions.

"Madoka?"

Madoka sighs. "I guess, we'll need to walk... but I don't know if we have enough supplies for that..."

Homura stares at her, wanting a further explanation.

Madoka gestures to the ruined scooter. "It's rusted, Homura-chan. You know, how when you rust the doors?"

Homura tilts her head.

"It's... been too long since anyone has used it."

"Madoka wants to use it?"

Madoka nods.

"Okay."

Madoka blinks, and watches as Homura approaches the rusted scooter. She sees her concentrate, and stares as the rust slowly rescinds.

"...You can reverse time on things too, Homura-chan?"

Homura removes her hand, turning to Madoka with a familiar look on her face.

Madoka smiles, reaching over to pull her close. She kisses her on her forehead. "Thank you, Homura-chan. This'll make traveling a lot easier."

Homura throws her arms around her, almost glowing with pride.

Madoka holds her for a while, realizing that it's not surprising what Homura can do. Now that their collars are disabled, she herself finds it easier to extract memories even from things she's not touching.

"Homura-chan? Can you let go?"

She reluctantly pulls away.

"Time to test this to see if it works."

The engine is in fact restored, but to Madoka's disappointment, it sputters, and she hears the soft whine as it powers down.

"Ah... the battery...?" She double checks it, and notices that the meter is blinking. "Mm... it's solar... so we just have to push it somewhere brighter so that it can charge faster. Homura-chan?"

Homura obediently lifts her head.

"Help me move this."

"Okay."

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After almost having the hangar doors fall on them when Homura knocks into one, they manage to roll the scooter outside. By her estimation, it'll take around a few days to restore the battery to full capacity.

Homura pokes the scooter curiously. "We're not going to use it?"

Madoka shakes her head. "It needs to charge." She points to the solar panel on the back. "This is where sunlight enters, and it converts into energy."

Homura stares at her blankly.

"It'll need to remain in the sun for a few days until we leave."

Homura taps on the panel. "Slow..."

Madoka nods in agreement. "Yes, but that's okay. We'll just look around for supplies."

She turns away, trying to decide where to search first when she hears beeping from the scooter. She turns back around, and Homura is once again staring at her.

She checks the meter, and sees that it's now full.

And it's not the first time that she realizes just how amazing—and terrifying Homura's power is.

Homura is still waiting. She holds out her arms and Homura runs into them, pressing her face against Madoka's neck.

"It's full, Madoka."

She nods. "It is, Homura-chan. Thank you."

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The scooter itself brings in its own troubles, and Madoka immediately hops off, moving to Homura's side as the girl remains lying on the ground from her tumble.

"Homura-chan, I told you to hold on, didn't I?"

Homura nods, expression still dazed as she rubs at her head.

Madoka sighs. "Are you okay? Can you move?" She stares into Homura's eyes, trying to determine if she has a concussion from her fall.

Lavender focuses on her briefly, before they close as Homura reverses time.

"Okay." She murmurs as her eyes open again. "I'm okay." She slowly sits up, and Madoka ropes an arm around her shoulders to support her.

"Are you sure?" Madoka says, looking into her eyes again.

Homura nods. "Yes."

They both stand, though Madoka keeps her arm around Homura's waist.

"Will you remember to hold on this time?"

Homura lowers her eyes. "Yes..."

Madoka sighs, before she brings Homura close to kiss her cheek. "I just don't want you to get hurt, okay?"

"Okay..."

Madoka taps her nose. "I'm not mad, so don't look like that, please."

Homura lifts her head. "...Look like what?"

"Come give me a hug, Homura-chan."

Homura obliges, and Madoka holds her close.

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Following the memories of one of the nicer lab assistants that had once given Madoka a piece of chocolate, they make their way across the desert to where there's another research facility nearby.

It's separated from the main building, and disguised as storage.

Even though the doorway is open, they find the inside in better condition than the one they had come from.

The only light inside is from the opened door, and Madoka fumbles around, trying to see if any of the consoles can access the emergency generator she knows is installed in the building.

"Homura-chan?" She turns, barely able to see Homura even though she's right next to her. "Can you restore this computer?"

"Which one...?"

"Hold out your hand."

After a few attempts, Madoka manages to match her hand with Homura's.

"This one," she murmurs as she lowers their hands to the metal console.

She hears the creak, and disturbing noises as circuits are restored.

"Okay," Homura tells her as she pulls her hand away.

Madoka pushes one of the buttons, and there's a click, before the lights suddenly flicker on. Once her eyes readjust, she checks the screen, and after keying a few sequences, she draws up the meter that shows how much power is left for the generator.

"Two hours?" She traces the map in her mind, trying to determine which areas to go through first that will hold the most supplies. "Okay. Got it. Homura-chan?"

Homura hums, looking at her expectantly.

"We have two hours until the generator powers down. Can you keep track?"

"Okay."

Madoka nods. "Okay, I know where we can find another backpack. Will you be okay carrying one?"

Homura tilts her head.

"Mm, well, we'll just play this by ear. Let's go, Homura-chan."

"Okay."

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She doesn't have many expectations on how much weight Homura can carry, so she overloads most of the supplies into her own bag, keeping Homura's as light as possible.

"Madoka?"

"Hm?" She's struggling, and Homura tries to help her by stepping behind her, and lifting the bag.

"...I can carry more?"

Madoka turns to Homura, eyeing her slim frame. She knows that Homura has been inside that cell for years; she knows how thin she is under those clothes.

Their inevitable travels outside will no doubt make Homura stronger, but for now, she can easily say that she's in better shape than the other girl.

"...I'll be okay, Homura-chan."

Homura refuses to let go, and Madoka sighs in slight exasperation.

"How much time until the generator shuts off?" she asks instead.

"Thirty minutes, seven seconds."

Madoka nods. "We need to get back up to the surface before then. It'll be hard to navigate through the debris otherwise."

"I can carry more?"

Madoka looks behind her, because Homura is still refusing to budge. "...Alright. I'll add more to your pack."

"Okay."

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They make it back to the console room with 5 minutes to spare.

Homura coughs, her breaths coming out in gasps from her exertion.

Madoka gently lowers her to the floor. She slides the bag off to rub Homura's back.

"I told you I was okay," she says softly.

Homura coughs again. After another moment, she slowly straightens out as her body recovers.

"Okay..." she murmurs. "I'm okay."

Madoka stares. "Homura-chan?"

Homura hums.

"We'll be traveling a lot, once we leave this place."

Homura nods.

"I don't know what's out there, but I have a feeling that things aren't like how I remember them to be."

Homura tilts her head.

"...We might have to walk around, and most likely run... We'll need to build up endurance somehow..."

"En...durance...?"

"Mmhmm. Usually it's through exercising..."

"Exercising...?"

Madoka sighs, pulling Homura close. "You can't keep rewinding your body to your previous state."

Homura blinks in confusion.

"Like, when I get hurt, you heal me, remember?"

"Yes. So there's no pain."

"And how do you do that, Homura-chan?"

"...I go back."

Madoka nods. "And just right now, you remember you were coughing?"

"Yes."

"How did you fix that?"

"I...went back...?"

Madoka nods again.

"I...shouldn't?"

"Mm... your powers, they're stronger now, right? Than before?"

"Yes..."

"If you went too far back, your powers wouldn't be as strong, right?"

Homura frowns. "...I don't know."

"When we exercise, our bodies slowly get stronger. If you keep going back, your body won't get strong."

Homura takes a moment to process her words. "I...shouldn't go back?"

Madoka shakes her head. "The only time you should is if we're hurt. You can also speed the process of healing, right?"

"It..." Homura tilts her head. "...leaves a... mark?"

"Mm..." She pauses, shifting through Homura's memories. "Okay. We'll do it this way. If I'm hurt, or you're hurt, you can go back."

"Okay."

"If... say, we need something restored, then you'll need to go back."

"Okay."

"But, unless we're in danger, you shouldn't go back; you should go forward."

"Forward..."

"Uh huh, like how you open the doors? Or, uhm... how you dealt with the white creature."

Homura stiffens, and Madoka strokes her head.

"Shh, it's okay. That was just an example. It's not here any more; or at least, only traces of it are still here..."

"Okay..."

The lights flicker twice, before they power down.

"Alright." Madoka kisses Homura's forehead. "That's our cue to leave. Do you know how long until the sun sets, Homura-chan?"

"Sunset...?"

"Mm," Madoka helps slips the backpack onto Homura's back. "Sunset is when the sun disappears." She supports Homura as they slowly stand to their feet.

"No. I... don't know...?"

"That's okay," Madoka hugs her in reassurance. "Let's go back outside, to where we can at least see what we're doing."

"Okay."

\\

She rearranges their packs, reorganizing the things inside since she had pretty much grabbed anything that could be remotely useful for their trip.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura turns to her, blinking at the black spots that remain in her eyes.

"...You shouldn't look at the sun directly. It'll damage your eyes."

Homura blinks, and lifts her hands to rub her eyes to try and force the spots away. "Damage?" she murmurs.

Madoka nods. "If you stare at it too long, it'll make you blind, and you won't be able to see."

"Oh. That's...not good..."

"Nope, it's not."

Homura points to the sun, and Madoka smiles when she sees the way she's avoiding looking at it. "It is, sunset?"

"Not yet. I'll tell you when. It'll be dark outside, kind of like inside the building earlier."

"Okay..."

"Come here, Homura-chan." She pats to the spot next to her, and Homura crawls over to take a seat.

"Okay."

/

Using an old trick she picks up from somewhere, Madoka holds out her hand towards the sun. She judges the distance between her fingers and the horizon, and after a quick calculation, figures out that they probably only have a few more hours of sunlight.

Rather than travel without knowing where they can safely rest, she decides to enter the main building once more. It's a hassle to weave

back through the maze, but it's at least cleaner there, and they can wash up one last time before they leave.

It's also brighter in there, and once they enter the section powered by the solar generator, they click off their flashlights.

"Madoka?"

"Hm?"

"We're... leaving here?"

Madoka nods. "Today will be our last day here, Homura-chan."

Homura grips her hand tightly.

She pats Homura's hand. "It's okay, Homura-chan. You can be scared. I'll be here, though."

Homura looks at her. "Is... Madoka scared too?"

Madoka blinks. "Mm... A little."

Homura squeezes her hand. "I'll, be here, too..."

Madoka smiles. "Thank you, Homura-chan."

\\

Homura is asleep, and she smiles at the dream she's having. Homura hasn't had a nightmare in a while, and she strokes her head affectionately.

She knows she should be sleeping too, as she had already told Homura to wake as soon as the sun rises.

Which, she figures has to be in a few hours.

But her mind is jumbled, and she finally has the time to sort through all the new memories acquired today.

It's hard to rearrangement everything in chronological order, and she has barely scratched the surface when she feels her eyes drooping.

She sighs, and snuggles close to Homura as she closes her eyes.

She almost misses the effects of the collar, and the way it limited her senses.

But—she has time, and knows that she'll eventually be strong enough to control her powers, just like how Homura controls hers.

/

It's bright and early when they leave the building, and Homura has yawned four times now as Madoka preps their scooter for travel.

They'll head north, where there's a city nearby that the workers sometimes visit to buy supplies. She also hopes it'll give her a clue to where they're at.

"Hold on tightly, Homura-chan."

Homura tightens her arms and presses her face into Madoka's back.

"Don't let go, okay?"

"Okay..."

She starts the engine, and with one last glance at Homura, she shifts the gear and releases the brake.

"Don't let go, Homura-chan," she repeats once more as the scooter pulls forward.

"I won't..."

\\

Their unmarked path eventually merges into a cracked highway. The scenery doesn't change though, and there's still empty, flat plains surrounding them.

Many travelers have passed through here, and she already understands that they're still in Japan.

Words with accents whisper into her ears, and it takes her a moment to place them: Aomori.

She frowns in response; she has never met her kidnappers, but she had no idea that they'd be so far up north, and yet still so close.

Homura's grip slackens, and she immediately grabs her arm with one hand as the other controls the scooter.

She slows their speed, and pulls over as she waits for it to come to a stop.

She turns to Homura, who is avoiding her eyes.

"S-Sorry..."

Madoka gently strokes her head. "Are you sleepy, Homura-chan?"

Homura tries to deny it, but a yawn answers for her.

"Hmm..." Madoka glances around. "How long have we been driving for, Homura-chan?"

"...Two hours, eleven minutes, twenty five seconds."

She nods. "We'll take a small break. We'll stretch for a bit, and then take a nap."

"Okay..."

/

An hour later, and they're back on their way.

"Madoka?"

"Hm?"

"...Hot."

"Mm." The sun is bearing down on their backs, and it doesn't help that Homura is pressed so close to her.

She pulls the scooter over once more.

Homura hops off from the seat, and she follows suit.

Homura tugs at her jacket. "Can I take this off…?"

She nods, and Homura immediately fumbles as she tries to take the jacket off.

"…Hold still, Homura-chan."

A minute later, Homura stands in shorts and a light t-shirt, squinting up at the sunlight.

"Bright," she murmurs.

Madoka nods as she stuffs Homura's clothes into one of the packs. "It's… better than snow though."

Homura tilts her head.

"White, and cold," she explains. She thinks briefly, and realizes that it's not a coincidence that it's hot. "Homura-chan?"

Homura is wiping the sweat from her forehead, and looks up at Madoka.

"Once we stop for the night, I want you to heal our bodies, okay?"

"…back?"

She nods.

"Okay."

\\

They travel for another hour until the scenery finally changes. She immediately steps on the brakes, and the scooter slows down to a halt.

"Madoka…?"

She nods, reaching for Homura's hand. "I know…"

The ground around them is no longer flat, and she can hear the cries even though they're still so far away.

"Clocks..." Homura murmurs into her ear.

She turns to her in alarm. "Alive?"

"Faster..."

"What does that mean, Homura-chan?"

"Not human... And, some that are slow..."

She stares at Homura, looking through her memories to understand what she's saying.

"Wild animals... and something else," Madoka murmurs as she stares ahead.

"Madoka?"

"Hm?"

"What happened...?"

Homura's confusion is palatable, and she takes a moment to reorganize the things she's slowly picking up.

"There... was a war, Homura-chan."

"War?"

Madoka nods towards the large craters in the ground. "Bombs, and other weapons... Like guns..."

Homura frowns. "War... is bad then."

"Very bad, Homura-chan... Lots of people died..."

"Died...?"

"Mm..." She closes her eyes, filing visions of lifeless eyes into a separate compartment in her mind. "Their clocks... stopped."

"Oh..."

She glances behind her. "Do you know how many animals there are, Homura-chan? And how many... whatever else there are?"

Homura concentrates on the clicks. "...fifteen, and only one. Oh... fourteen."

Madoka frowns. "Fourteen? Did you miscount?"

Homura shakes her head. "One stopped."

Madoka sucks in a breath. "Okay. Do you know how far they are?"

Homura tilts her head. "Far. Very faint."

"Okay. T-That's good. We're going to continue on, Homura-chan. Tell me if they get closer, okay?"

"Okay."

"Hold on tight."

"Okay."

\\

Though they need to take more detours as the roads once again disappear, those animals and whatever else that Homura had detected are finally behind them.

As they drive up a small hill, the outline of the city can be seen in the distance. Travelers who have come this way echo the same sentiment she has in her mind, until one sharp thought has her breathing in deeply.

"Madoka...?"

"What is it, Homura-chan?"

"Lots... of stopped clocks..."

Madoka pats her hand, and merely increases their speed. "I know. Are there any animals nearby?"

"Some..."

Madoka waits, knowing that Homura is counting.

"T-Thirty...?"

"And the other thing?"

"...Five."

Madoka frowns. "That many...?"

Homura nods. "Yes."

"...Tell me if we get too close. I want to avoid them as much as possible."

"Madoka...?"

"Hm?"

"I'll... protect you?"

She glances behind her briefly. "Thank you, Homura-chan."

/

With a groan, she cracks one eye open. She blinks in confusion as she realizes she's lying down.

She sits up slowly, and looks around.

"Homura-chan...?" Panic enters her mind. "Homura-chan!"

She hears noises off to the side, and immediately scrambles to her feet, glancing around for a weapon.

"Madoka...?"

She relaxes when she hears that familiar voice. "Homura-chan?"

There's a grey blur, before she's tackled to the floor.

"Madoka..."

Homura grips her tightly, and Madoka takes the opportunity to look through her memories.

"Homura-chan..." She hugs her tighter.

"Madoka...?"

"Hm?"

"How...do I get stronger?"

Madoka strokes her head. "Don't worry, we'll both get stronger, Homura-chan."

Homura nods, before she buries her face back into Madoka's neck.

"Is it safe here, Homura-chan?" Madoka murmurs softly.

"Far..." Homura lifts her head. "The scooter..."

"Mm, it's okay, Homura-chan. If it's still there, tomorrow, then it's fine. If not... I already know a few places we can search for a new vehicle."

"O-Our bags...?"

"We'll find replacements if we need to. Don't worry."

"Sorry..."

"Thank you for saving me, Homura-chan."

"Sorry," Homura mumbles again.

\\

To their relief, the scooter remains untouched. Madoka traces the lingering memories of the animals that wander the city, and a few glimpses has her figuring out they are merely a pack of wild dogs.

They hunt the rats that plague the city, and compete with the feral cats.

There's a brief glance of the thing they had run from yesterday, but the fear felt in every animal overruns her senses and she can't get a clear view.

"Madoka...?"

She nods, knowing that she's getting distracted. "We'll look for more supplies... I don't know how the other cities are, but I don't like how there's so many of these... things here. You keep an eye out for them, okay, Homura-chan?"

"Okay."

"After this, we'll be heading south... We'll follow the train tracks, but if it's get too dangerous, we'll move closer to the coastline."

"Coast...?"

Madoka nods, and helps readjust Homura's jacket. "The ocean. Blue, and full of water."

"Ocean," Homura repeats.

Madoka kisses her head, before she moves to the scooter. "Help me push this inside the building, Homura-chan."

"Okay."

/

They manage to find better fitting clothes and shoes, though Homura has to restore to them to their previous state.

As Madoka surveys the damage in the city, to her relief, she finds that most of it is due to neglect, the elements, and to the wild animals scurrying around.

The city had been evacuated, how ever long ago, which gives her hope that perhaps there are other survivors somewhere.

She knows though, that what she had seen outside, however, paints a not too happy picture in her mind.

"Madoka?"

"Hm?" She turns to see Homura holding out a small toy. "What did you find, Homura-chan?"

Homura brings it closer, showing off a small cat plush, already restored.

"Do you like this, Homura-chan?"

Homura stares at it blankly, before turning back to look at Madoka.

"You should give your friend a name, Homura-chan."

Homura tilts her head.

"Mm..." Madoka taps her chin as she cycles through names. "Why don't we call her Amy?"

"Amy?" Homura echoes.

Madoka reaches over, and pats Amy on the head. "Nice to meet you, Amy."

"Amy..."

Madoka smiles, knowing that Homura will cherish Amy as much as her previous owner did.

\\

They're moving through the city, about to return to their scooter, when Madoka sees a spectre of one of the lab assistants entering a nearby building.

She narrows her eyes. "Homura-chan."

"Madoka?"

"Are there any clocks over there?" She points.

Homura tilts her head, still cradling Amy in her hands. "Close, but still far."

"Okay. One more stop, and then we'll leave."

"Okay."

/

Homura pets Amy gently as she watches Madoka continue to fiddle with the computer. She can tell that the other girl is growing agitated; she has been quiet for a while now.

She glances to the screen, but Madoka is thumbing through the information too fast for her to keep up.

"...Madoka?"

"Just a moment, Homura-chan," Madoka mutters, not looking up from the computer.

Homura hugs Amy close, not liking how Madoka is ignoring her.

"...Madoka?"

Madoka whirls around, and Homura immediately flinches back, dropping Amy in the process.

Homura ducks her head. "I'm s-sorry..."

Madoka wants to slap herself when she sees how scared Homura looks. She kneels, and gently picks Amy up. She's just as gentle as she brushes the dirt away.

"Homura-chan?" she says softly as she stands.

"S-Sorry..."

Madoka holds Amy out, and after another fearful look, Homura reaches for her.

"I'm sorry, Homura-chan," Madoka murmurs. "Can you forgive me?"

Homura hugs Amy close, her eyes nervously darting around the room.

"...Can I ask you for a hug, Homura-chan?"

Homura nods, and slowly walks forward. Madoka takes her into her arms, holding her close.

"I'm sorry," Madoka murmurs again.

"S-Sorry," Homura responds.

Madoka sighs, filing Homura's reaction into her mind. She strokes Homura's head, and finally, the other girl relaxes.

"Madoka...?"

"Hm?"

"...What's wrong?"

Madoka's hand stops as she organizes her thoughts. "...I found out something not too good in the computer."

"Not good?"

She shakes her head, and presses a kiss to Homura's forehead. "Not good at all."

Homura hums softly. She suddenly stiffens, and Madoka immediately pulls away.

"How close, Homura-chan?"

"Close. Clicking."

Madoka nods towards the computers. "Can you destroy that, Homura-chan?"

"Okay."

Homura makes short work of the console, turning it and the generator back into a useless pile of junk in seconds.

"Let's go, Homura-chan." Madoka takes her hand.

"Okay."

\\

When they reach the scooter, Madoka freezes when she sees the pack of wild dogs circling around it.

One of them looks up at the sound of their footsteps, and Madoka takes a step back.

"Madoka...?"

"Shhh, Homura-chan," she whispers. She quickly shuffles through their options, knowing the only main offense they have right now is Homura.

These animals are just trying to survive though, and she doesn't really want to kill them if they don't have to.

"Madoka...?"

Madoka sees a few ears perk at Homura's voice. "Homura-chan..."

Homura turns to her, seeking instructions.

"...Is there anyway you can stop them, without hurting them, Homura-chan...?"

"Stop?"

Madoka notes the lowered ears; she knows they're about to strike.

"Stop," Homura repeats as two dogs shoot forward.

Madoka is about to throw herself in front of Homura when she hears a click, and suddenly the scenery is washed out grey.

Fingers grip her arm tightly, and she turns around in surprise.

"Homura-chan...?"

"Stopped...?" Homura tilts her head.

Madoka stares, before she realizes that Homura is straining to stop the area around them. She quickly tugs Homura forward, towards the scooter.

They board, and Madoka turns to Homura who's now shaking with exertion. "It's okay now, Homura-chan."

There's another click, and Madoka holds onto Homura's arms as she guns the engine.

There's barking, but she ignores it as she steers the scooter out the building, and into the streets.

"Don't let go, Homura-chan," she tells her.

"O-Okay..."

/

They drive for a short while, until Madoka is sure that they're out of danger and closer to the outskirts of the city. She pulls the scooter to a stop, before she turns to Homura who looks about ready to fall asleep.

"Homura-chan? Are you okay?"

"Okay," she mumbles, pressing Amy against her face.

"You can lean on me and take a nap," Madoka tells her.

Homura leans forward, resting her head against Madoka's chest as the other girl continues to stroke her head. Her eyes close, and Madoka kisses her forehead.

She sighs, and looks around. She doesn't want to stay here for too long, in case any other animals show up.

She'll let Homura rest for a bit; it'll at least give her time to plan, and reorganize her thoughts.

\\

Madoka finds out there's a problem with following the train tracks: most of them don't exist any more.

She follows the map in her mind, using the cues from other travelers to find the road that will lead her in the right direction, but that too brings on its own set of problems.

There are crude barricades scattered around, set up by people as they tried to block whatever it was that they were running from.

The further they ride, the one thing that keeps repeating is the same fear felt by every person, before their thoughts are suddenly cut off.

It happens enough times that she needs to pull over.

She ends up throwing up what little she has in her stomach, and after that it's mostly dry heaves.

"Madoka...?" Homura rubs her back, face worried as Madoka remains hunched over.

Her throat burns, and her eyes sting with fresh tears. "I'm... okay," she croaks out, finally straightening up.

She digs through their bags for their water tablets, proceeding to split one in half and using an extra shirt like a wash cloth. A wipe of her face, and the rest of the water is used to rinse out her mouth.

Once done, she discards the shirt, and takes in another shaky breath.

"Madoka...?"

"Can I get a hug, Homura-chan?"

Homura complies, hugging her close as she returns the gesture.

She soaks in Homura's warmth, letting Homura's thoughts comfort her muddled brain.

"Madoka...?"

"Hm?"

"Are you okay?"

She presses a kiss to Homura's forehead. "Yes. I am now."

Homura hums softly.

After another moment, Madoka gently pulls away. "Okay... I think... we'll follow the coastline, instead."

Homura tilts her head. "The ocean."

Madoka smiles. "Yes, you'll finally get to see the ocean again, Homura-chan."

"Okay."

/

They navigate over roads and roads that are no longer roads, until Madoka eventually finds one highway still intact that runs parallel against the coastline.

It's emptier here, and Madoka feels herself relaxing as she's not constantly assaulted with memories of people dying around her.

She drives slower, pointing out the sight of the water that they can see from the road. She senses that Homura vaguely remembers it, and looks for the most accessible exit to get closer to the shore.

"Madoka?"

Madoka pulls the scooter up, stopping in front of a pile of debris that blocks their current path. "Hm?"

"Is this, the ocean...?"

"Soon," she murmurs, steering the scooter around to make a U-turn.

They ride, and continue to ride past more barricades, until finally, they find a small opening that the scooter can barely fit through.

Past the ruined buildings, and more vague memories in between.

She draws the scooter to a halt, and as soon as it's stopped, Homura hops off. Madoka joins her side, staring at Homura's face, and judging her reaction.

"...Familiar," Homura says softly.

Madoka nods, reaching for her hand. "I think, you came here when you were around four, or five. Before..." her voice trails off, and Homura intertwines their fingers together.

"Before I got my powers..."

Madoka nods. "You remember, Homura-chan?"

"...A little. Can we go in?"

"Are there any clocks around?"

Homura shakes her head. "Empty."

"Not even the slower one?"

"None."

Madoka files that into the back of her mind, before she takes a step forward, and pulls Homura along with her.

\\

They both shed their socks and shoes, leaving it in the sands as they approach the shore.

The waves are calming, and Madoka watches as they crash forward, before rescinding and leaving sea foam in its wake.

Most memories here are children playing, of families spending time together. Volleyball tournaments, and early morning joggers.

Madoka looks beyond those who scream as high swells engulf the land, instead concentrating on the happier times.

"Madoka?"

"Hm?"

"Can we walk closer?"

"Sure."

The water is cool against their skin, and she smiles when she sees Homura's reaction.

"It's cold, Homura-chan."

Homura nods. She tentatively dips her toe into the water once more, and Madoka grins, suddenly stepping further into the water as she holds Homura's hand tightly.

Homura protests as a wave covers their legs up to their calves, but Madoka smiles, pulling Homura close for a hug.

"It's not that bad, Homura-chan."

"Cold..."

/

They walk along the beach, two sets of footprints following behind them briefly, before the waves wash them away.

"We should... probably figure out where to sleep tonight," Madoka murmurs as she glances towards the horizon, noting that the sun is now dipped further down. "Maybe, we can find a watch, and then keep track of time somehow."

Homura tilts her head, and Madoka smiles, pulling her close to kiss her on the cheek.

"Don't worry, it's not meant to replace you, Homura-chan."

"Okay."

\\

Sleep is easier here, in this city on the coastline.

Maybe it's because it's safer; maybe it's because there's not as many memories to haunt them.

She prefers it, and despite her wish to return to a certain destination, she decides that they'll stay here for a while.

It's been long enough, that an extra day or two will mean nothing.

After all, it's almost as if they have all the time in the world now.

With Homura trailing after her, they explore the city, and visit all the houses still intact.

Eventually, Madoka learns that before they enter, she needs to kick the walls to determine whether or not they can go in.

The one thing she finds interesting though, is that there are no wild animals here. There's nothing here, except for her, Homura, and ghosts of people long past.

"Madoka?"

"Hm?"

"Can we walk the shore?"

"Okay."

/

Homura doesn't mind that they stay; in fact, she prefers when they're walking along the sands with their feet bare. She likes the white noise when the waves crash; likes the taste of salt that lingers on her tongue.

Sand and grit are always stuck in between their toes, but she doesn't mind.

She really, really likes it here.

Which is why Madoka extends their visit, and they stay for another week.

Homura hasn't had this kind of freedom in a long, long time, and Madoka wishes that Homura could always be as happy as she is now.

\\

The days leading up to their departure, she makes sure to remind Homura that they're going to leave soon, but that they're going to follow the shore.

Homura pouts, gripping Amy tightly, and Madoka draws her in close, kissing her on the forehead. "Don't worry, you can still walk on the sand every day. I promise."

Appeased, Homura nods. "Okay."

/

They follow the coast like she promised, and every day they watch the sun set as it dips below the horizon. Homura is slowly getting stronger; slowly getting used to living life outside.

They still haven't found any survivors, and all they find are more memories, and more things that reinforce the idea that they are the only ones still alive in this country.

Madoka knows though, that this project she and Homura were a part of extends beyond Japan.

She doesn't focus on that, however, because her only goal at this point is to finally go home.

And after that, after she figures out what has happened to her family, then, she'll think about life in the afte**r.**

AN: Thank you for reading. Yes; take care.